

SIERRA VISION AWARD NOMINATION

MYVALLEYSPRINGS.COM

It is with utmost deference to MYVALLEYSPRINGS.COM that I wish they be recognized for their devotion to their community and the Sierra Nevada. There are no doubt many deserving individuals, groups and agencies doing innumerable and underappreciated work on behalf of the mighty Sierras. I hope to make a case on behalf of this group, in support of why their particular example is of importance to the overall health and sustainability of future development in the Sierras. This groups' reality today will be an example to many other Sierra communities in the future.

In the Central Sierras there exists a small group of committed citizens who have worked tirelessly, for years, in support of planning for their community. The town of Valley Springs is located in the foothills of Calaveras County. As an unincorporated area with a rich history, it has been developing at a rapid clip, due to it's proximity to the urban centers of the great Central Valley. The community is home to what was at one time the largest land subdivision in the State of California, Rancho Calaveras. The 3,600 lot subdivision straddles New Hogan Reservoir on the Calaveras River and has permanently impacted the nature and community of Valley Springs.

In response to the rapid and seemingly uncontrolled development happening around them, a small band of citizens formed a community organization called MyValleySprings.com to do community planning and help create a vision for their area's future. This group began an educational campaign involving the many residents of Western Calaveras. They sponsored community meetings on topics such as Water, Transportation and Community identity. Community members attended these meetings in large numbers and this groups' success attracted new opportunities to secure funding and expertise for their area. Grants were written and funded to bring planning professionals to the area to help the residents create a vision and plan for community character.

On the heels of these efforts the County embarked on a General Plan update and encouraged individual communities to work towards updating or creating Community Plans for the areas in which they resided. MyValleySprings.Com in conjunction with the Local Government Commission and the area transportation planning agency submitted for a community-based planning grant and was awarded over two hundred thousand dollars to update the area community plan which had been adopted by the county board of supervisors in 1974.

The critical component of the planning effort was community outreach. Hundreds of community members participated in the effort to update the thirty-six year old Plan. Over preceding years, many new land divisions had been made resulting in conflicting ideas of what constituted Valley Springs, and which areas were simply outlying

subdivisions or unique communities in and of themselves. A massive effort to work through this sensitive question ensued.

The subdivision of Rancho Calaveras was initially included with the new community boundary. This sparked a backlash against the planning effort by some residents of Rancho Calaveras who were not in support of being included as part of the new boundary. The issue ostensibly hinged on the belief that if the subdivision was included in the augmented boundary, the Special Plan which governed land use in the subdivision would be nullified. Calaveras County Planning staff attempted to assure the residents that this was not the case. The planning process doubled back to again ask the community about preferred boundaries. This time Rancho Calaveras removed itself from the Valley Springs planning area, even though this is where they get mail, shop, rent video's, dine out, and participate in community events.

The planning process moved forward with the newly selected boundaries. The community plan process which sought to involve a diverse cross-section of the community succeeded in doing so. The tenor of the community discussion changed as a result of the confusion created by accusations of socialism, tax hikes, a hidden agenda, and a government takeover, brought against the planning team which consisted of the Local Government Commission, Calaveras County, Caltrans, Calaveras Council of Governments and MVS.Com.

The planning process revealed that on most topics there was broad agreement; residents of the area loved its rural nature, small town feel, recreation opportunities, friendly faces and their homes. Unfortunately, the few areas of disagreement were used by a small number of residents opposed to the effort in an attempt to tear the planning process apart.

Throughout this entire process, a critical public discussion took place. Where did the future of the community lie and how would residents plan for future development, jobs, industry, housing, recreation and other community goals? By any measurement this was the broadest public outreach and participation the County had ever experienced for a planning project.

The role of MVS.Com in this process was to help involve the broadest public participation possible. Members of the organization walked door to door in the community handing out flyers, translated information into Spanish, kept the business associations and members involved in the planning process, put up banners in the community, helped set up and tear down for each and every community meeting and generally involved themselves in the facilitation of community involvement. In this effort they succeeded wildly, but not without becoming embroiled in a cruel discussion which painted them as Socialists with malevolent intent for the community.

The end product of the thousands of hours invested was a Valley Springs Community Plan. It is a plan that highlights the many areas of agreement in the community and proposes policies and implementation measures to protect and enhance the many valuable anthropologic and natural features of the community. The plan also identifies issues

within the community that frustrated many of the residents such as flooding, circulation and the lack of jobs, and likewise proposed policies and implementation measures, along with land use changes to help the community address these issues.

The document is a good one. Not perfect, they never are. The community of Valley Springs would not have received a \$250,000 investment in their future if it weren't for MVS.Com. Their many efforts were repaid with scorn and slander by a small number of vocal citizens.

It is the efforts of individuals like Muriel Zeller, Colleen Platt, Mark Jones, Cathryn Jackson, and Joyce Techel that in the end result in the greatest benefit to a community and the Sierras. Individuals who are willing to endure the fury and tyranny of a few and remain focused on their community and their environment, need to be applauded for doing the work that so few will do and making the investments that so few will make. Please help our community recognize this group which has devoted so many hours to trying to build a sustainable community, a sense of place, and respect for the incredible natural environment which surrounds them!

Small, rural, foothill communities are under the greatest pressure to develop. If we don't encourage responsible planning here, where will we do it?

Respectfully submitted,

Marti Crane

* While a Final Version of the Valley Springs Community Plan has been completed, it has not been adopted by the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors, nor clearly stated how it will or will not be incorporated as part of the General Plan update.